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ABSTRACT

It seems that this paper, as if it were some textual Elvis, by the author's own admission has eluded him. With the set of commas included in the title of the paper, it is not clear whether 2 or 3 people are being referred to. The paper's first version took Bakhtin as the reigning monarch of English studies and applied his complicated and complicating theories of dialogism to Maxine Hong Kingston's "No Name Woman." But then, on second thought, the paper considers that some of those attending the 4C's (Conference on College Composition and Communication) presentation in Tennessee might have come for the "Elvisness" of the panel, to be "all shook up." Noting that Elvis is an American icon, the paper also notes that Elvis is dead. The paper points out that just as Elvis' becoming so carnivalized and internally persuasive means that his audience can never recover his essence, the original reason for his mass popularity, so too is the reader unable to know "No Name Aunt," the adulterous figure in Kingston's book. Obviously, this paper takes a turn--it began as a deriding impersonation of the academic paper but has itself become carnivalized, turned topsy turvy, retreating into the object of its ridicule. The paper suggests that it is impossible to laugh at Kingston because carnival is concerned with the masses, the folk, not the individual. The paper concludes that Elvis, as a non-writer, was powerless to do anything but occupy a class of his own, while Kingston, as a writer, is able to rescue her aunt from the same fate. (TB)

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ED 391 167

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Bakhtin, the King, and Kingston: Dialogizing "No Name Woman" and One-Name Man

This paper, as if it were some textual Elvis, has eluded me. Like any conference presenter, I wrote the title long before the paper. Other than its catchy alliterative `k' and assonant `i' sounds, "Bakhtin, the King, and Kingston" left me a loophole. With that set of commas in there--"Bakhtin, the King, and Kingston"--it's not clear whether two people or three are being referred to. Is this a list, with Bakhtin and Kingston named and the King obviously referring to Elvis Presley? Or is the King an appositive describing Bakhtin?

Seeing Bakhtin as the king is not so hard to do. Michael Holquist says that Bakhtin "is one of the three names most mentioned in manuscripts submitted to PMLA" (195). While Bakhtin is increasingly cited and thus sighted in composition studies, his influence here is not as prominent as it is in literary studies. Still, if you chose this paper over the numerous others going on right now, it may be because you have an interest in Bakhtin, and thus maybe see him as at least an heir to the throne.

So, my first version of this talk took Bakhtin as the reigning

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monarch of English studies and applied his complicated and complicating theories of dialogism to Maxine Hong Kingston's "No Name Woman." Twenty minutes? No problem. Besides, I didn't know how I could fit Elvis in. Kingston, after all, is a serious "literary" writer, important enough to receive acclaim not only outside but within the academy. And Elvis is . . . well, he's the face that launched a thousand impostors, the voice that launched a million shrieks, the man who keeps tabloids from becoming torpid. How could his infamy be used in a way that wouldn't possibly denigrate Kingston's writing? Thus, I was ready to walk in here today and say that, yes, the title of my talk refers only to Bakhtin and Kingston, my not quite disembodied voice announcing "Elvis has left the building."

But then I considered some of you might actually be here for the Elvisness of the panel, looking for some drollery to tide you over until this evening's Humor Night. And I was all shook up. Did I want my talk predicated on the old bait and switch? Did I want to promise a break from convention conventions, and then not carry through with it? Besides, the site of the 4C's is Tennessee, adopted home of the King, and Elvis *is* mentioned in the title of the panel . . . surely he ought to make an appearance in each of the papers. No hound dog, I felt obligated to work in Elvis somehow.

One possibility involved cutting my hair and shaving my beard except for the sideburns, removing the glasses, trading the suit coat for a white rhinestone-studded jumpsuit with the four-inch-high, cardboard and starch reinforced collar, and belting out a scintillating rendition of "Heartbreak Hotel"--or rather "Hermitage Hotel" in honor of those of us who are jailhoused there--thus transforming my academic imposture into Elvis impostor. One problem, though. Being a reticent academic, I would remain ensconced behind this podium where you couldn't see my swivelling hips--though my fellow panelists could. Don't be cruel, you say. I'm not, I retort. Believe me.

Still, shouldn't Elvis make an appearance somewhere? I do want all of you to be able to return home and say, "You'll never guess who I saw in Nashville!" If you don't find him here, I have been informed that somewhere in town one can ride a train where all the help is Elvis impersonators. As with Elvis himself, though, I don't know how you go about finding it.

Once I began to write the second version of this paper, it paralleled the first. There was too much Elvis, our nightly Milwaukee newspaper a cornucopia of stories and cartoons about the King. And once you begin paying attention, Elvis really is everywhere. Three examples from <u>one day</u>

last week. Driving to campus, I was listening to the student-run radio station from the Milwaukee School of Engineering. However, the morning-shift DJ referred to the college by the acronym ELVIS: Engineers Learning Very Interesting Subjects, he explained. On campus, a car passed by me. Its license plate read: E PRSLY. Unfortunately, I didn't get a good look at the driver. Finally, at the credit union, one of the tellers had a small picture of Elvis near her window. When I commented on it, she leaned over and whispered, "I don't tell this to everyone, but if you stare at that wall over there long enough, His weeping image will appear."

By now, I'm sure you're of suspicious minds, wondering if I'll ever get around to discussing the disparate characters characters of my title. I'm getting there.

Eventually, I returned to the original title. The more I considered it, the more I liked its initial, intended ambivalence. Why did it need to be resolved? Yes, the King is an appositive for Bakhtin and, yes, it refers to Elvis. It casts a sidelong glance at both possibilities. Such an ambivalence, a both/and choice rather than either/or is typical of Bakhtin, especially his view of carnival. Carnival laughter "is not an individual reaction to some isolated `comic' event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people . . ., directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's

participants. . . . [T]his laughter is ambivalent: gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives" (Rabelais 11-12). In a Bakhtinian celebration of carnival, I want to confront my fear of lowering Kingston and raising Elvis. I want to turn this whole scenario topsy-turvy, reversing high and low, the valued and unvalued, bringing together death and birth. I want to decrown the King to the point where that term "king" squints in several directions, and it is not clear to whom it refers.

But the subtitle still dissatisfied me. However, once I'd begun working on this third version in earnest, altering it became much easier. My amended title now reads: "Bakhtin, the King, and Kingston: Dialogizing `No Name Woman' and One-Name Man." But why the addition of "one-name man"?

We live in a society where one-name monikers denote mega-popularity. Besides Elvis, the entertainment field has the likes of Cher, Madonna, Prince, and Michael, be it Jordan or Jackson. And, since we've been discussing royalty, how about Charles, Di and the rest? Does this family even have a last name? By reducing people to one name--especially when it is a first name--they become non-people. As one writer said of Elvis's hiatus from live performances during the sixties,

> For over a decade, Elvis had been so swathed in mystery, so cushioned by wealth, so enormous in reputation and so manipulated, visually and cinematically, it was almost impossible to believe in his existence. You saw him on film, you heard him on records, but did he <u>really</u> exist? (Zmijewsky and Zmijewsky 91)

Yes, he exists, but only as the public figure, not as the private. He and his ilk are no longer treated as humans, becoming nothing more than a reification of society's desires. This is why Elvis is everywhere. He is continually recreated in society's own image, oscillating between kitchiness and campiness.

Perhaps, this can best be seen in those who impersonate the King. In a book entitled <u>I am Elvis: A Guide to Elvis Impersonators</u>, a part historical guide, part publicity promo for some sixty impersonators, I discovered some fascinating facts. I learned the birth date, height, weight, astrological sign and favorite Elvis song of each. I learned that Elvis impersonators come in many varieties--for example, the father and son Elvis team, the African-American Elvis, the female Elvis, the child Elvis, the Mexican Elvis with the pencil-thin moustache who calls himself El Vez. And I learned that if you so desire, you can visit the Elvis Presley

Impersonators Hall of Fame. Most fascinating, though, were the discussions of the impersonators' attitudes towards the original. Broadly, they fall into two categories. There are those for whom, as the female Elvis said, "Elvis is my life, the very core of me, my sole inspiration," or another, "For people growing up in the late 50's Elvis was not just a singer. He was a way of life," or this one: "When I step onto that stage, I am Elvis." For these people, the discourse of Elvis is the only discourse. It is, in Bakhtinian terminology, the authoritative word. The authoritative word, according to Bakhtin, "is located in a distanced zone, organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher. It is, so to speak, the word of the fathers. Its authority was already acknowledged in the past. It is a prior discourse. It is therefore not a question of choosing it from among other possible discourses that are its equal (Dialogic Imagination 342). Authoritative discourse is the discourse of a king. It can be ignored, but it cannot be questioned. These impersonators don't try to enter into dialogue with their Elvis discourse; they try to duplicate it.

Then there are those who say their Elvis impersonation is nothing more than an act, a way to entertain people. They leave Elvis on stage when they are finished performing. Their Elvis discourse is one among many. It is internally persuasive; it is discourse that is dialogic, "half-

ours, and half-someone else's." Bakhtin continues, "[It] is not so much interpreted by us as it is further, that is freely, developed, applied to new material, new conditions; it enters into interanimating relationships with new contexts" (Dialogic Imagination 345-46).

The impersonator four inches shorter than Elvis who scales down all his clothing, including the size and thickness of his sunglass lenses, to fit the exact proportions of Elvis, views Elvis as authoritative discourse. The impersonator who designs his clothes based on what he feels Elvis might wear were he still alive today sees him as internally persuasive discourse. Among Elvis impersonators, the former outnumber the latter.

To the average, non-Elvis-impersonating, non-fanatical American, we also understand Elvis as internally persuasive discourse. For us, Elvis is much more than the clothes he wore, the songs he sang, the movies he made. He is an American icon. He is dead, he's alive. He's been sighted; he's been heard. He sold out; he bought in. He played it straight; he played for laughs. He's the King; he's a virtuoso of hootchy kootchy. He's a parody of himself; he's rock and roll incarnate. He's a white boy's version of the blues; he's black music's greatest promoter. He's an original; he's a thief. He's the real thing; he's Graceland. He remains such a presence in our shifting national psyche that he even warrants a spot on E.D. Hirsch's

cultural literacy list.

More than merely existing in the American psyche, though, Elvis has been created and sustained by the American psyche. Even in a recent Rolling Stone, Elvis is discussed in these terms: "Presley remains the finest singer rock & roll has produced" (Evans 76). Herein lies the paradox. Elvis may have performed rock and roll, but rock and roll produced, that is created, Elvis. One chronicler notes: "The fans live out a fantasy of identification for Elvis, vicariously sharing his life. Without Elvis, the fans could switch their allegiance to another and survive. But without the fans, Elvis would dwindle into nothingness" (Zmijewsky and Zmijewsky 100). Fortunately for Elvis, seventeen years after his death, somewhere between 6 and 16 percent of Americans, depending on which poll is consulted, still remain convinced that he is alive.

To the rest of us, Elvis is dead. However, long before Elvis Presley died, Elvis Presley had already died. The King was never an original. In some ways, it began when his twin, Jesse Garon Presley, died six hours after birth. Later, with his ten-year run of bad movies and progressively blander records during the 60's, Presley become a parody of himself, the first Elvis impersonator. To himself, he always remained authoritative discourse. As one historian said of Presley while he was

still alive, "He reached a level of competence and has no desire to go forward. Why struggle with a new discipline when the old formula gives you everything you want?" (Zmijewsky and Zmijewsky 100). That is, why grapple with potentially altering, internally persuasive discourses when the authoritative voice is working just fine? Is it any wonder, then, when the American people are given the choice, as in the postage stamp sweepstakes, the young Elvis beat out the old Elvis? More than just showing a preference for smooth over chunky, we were choosing between a Jackson Pollock and a four-year-old's paint splatterings, the original vs. the original impostor. While I can't pinpoint it, I would argue this decrowning of the King coincided with Elvis's rise to one-name status.

Much less common, but even more effective at reducing a person's human-ness, is to continue the name subtraction until none remains, thus eliminating the person. This is what occurs in Kingston's "No Name Woman." The narrator in this chapter, who is a literary manifestation of Kingston herself, has been told conspiratorially by her mother that, while the family still lived in China, there was an aunt whose adulterous activities resulted in pregnancy. Combined with the severe poverty of the village, this led to a savage attack by the villagers on the home of No Name Aunt's family. On the night of birth, No Name Aunt drowns both her

child and herself in a well. There the mother's story stops. Once dead, the aunt becomes the "unspeakable."

Not only does No Name Aunt's family not acknowledge her death, they decide not to acknowledge her life. They do not just forget about her (which might be interpreted as a passive act, like forgetting a passé rock star), but they actively obliterate her from the collective family memory. It is not until Kingston recreates her in the words of "No Name Woman" that the Aunt again exists. Through this literary carnival similar to the continual Elvis resurrections, Kingston brings to life the dead, begetting something from nothing.

Kingston is unable to do this, though, until the authoritative discourse of her mother, bringing with it the words of the father, the village, and the Chinese culture gives way to the internally persuasive. For Kingston, this takes twenty years. In the meantime, she carries the dirty secret within her:

> I have thought that my family, having settled among immigrants who had also been their neighbors in the ancestral land, needed to clean their name, and a wrong word would incite the kinspeople even here. But there is more to this silence: they want me to participate in her punishment. And I have.

When she is ready to write her aunt's story, the narrator of "No Name

Woman" does not ask her mother more about the aunt. By not doing so, she is able to offer us not one version of No Name Aunt, but several versions--refusing to fix her to any one position. Kingston does not even ask her mother the aunt's name, for to do so would be to finalize her, to kill her off when instead she is trying to bring her life through death. Here, having no name serves her best. The aunt's importance for Kingston lies not in what she did (for the motives for her actions won't change the result), but that the multiple aunts represent two cultures: the Chinese, with its belief in tradition, community and female servility, and the American, with its belief in self-assertiveness, individuality and (relative) female equality. Yet, the aunt could never have known of this American way. In the aunts' struggles, then, we learn of Kingston's struggles, caught as she is between two cultures.

But, like Elvis, No Name Aunt is an impostor, too. She is a creation of Maxine Hong Kingston. Only <u>because</u> of the familial silencing, combined with Kingston's creative genius, has the aunt been resuscitated. Her creation says as much--more really--about Kingston than it does about the aunt. As Kingston says of her, "Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help." She becomes a sort of Frankenstein's monster, written into life. Kingston has pieced her

together from the few facts she knows. The aunt personifies Kingston's dialogic struggle between the Chinese and American cultures.

Just as Elvis's becoming so carnivalized and internally persuasive means we can never recover his essence, the original reason for his mass popularity, so too are we unable to know No Name Aunt. That is, we do not get the original; we only get the impostor. And in some cases, we discover, the impostor is more interesting than the original.

Obviously, my paper has taken a turn. What began as a deriding impersonation of the academic paper, has itself become carnivalized, turned topsy turvy, retreating into the object of its ridicule. The uneasiness you may have felt as this paper seemingly too slowly settles into its academic posture is necessary. We cannot laugh at Kingston because carnival is concerned with the masses, the folk, not with the individual. "No Name Woman" is filled with carnival--the creation of life out of death; the carnival-like attack by the masked, wild-haired, mob of villagers; the triumph of the collective over the individual. Yet, Kingston establishes her aunt as one against the village, an individual in the midst of carnival. Her reification of the individual is, in Bakhtin's view, antithetical to carnival.

Similarly, while I have celebrated and performed carnival in this

paper, I am suggesting that perhaps there is more. This can be found in the difference between creating and being created. Let me end with a brief comparison, this time between Elvis and Kingston. In his rock and roll history for baby boomers called Hipper Than Our Kids, Bruce Pollack says of Elvis, "[B]ecause he was a non-writer, and as much fan dancer as musician, he was unable to grow beyond his original and radical mixing of the races--he seemed powerless to do anything but occupy a class of his own, self-contained, externally-controlled, drawing from the bank account of his seemingly eternal image, fixed in that amazing year of 1956" (15). Because Kingston is a writer, she is, I assert, able to rescue her aunt from the same fate.

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